

Tiger mothers: Holding the president accountable

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

Despite a growing protest movement against the Iraq war, President Bush remains determined to “stay the course.” He offers sympathy to grieving parents, but his attention seems to be elsewhere. So he seemed not to notice the people gathered along the roadside when, on a recent hot August day, his limousine drove past a crowd of Gold Star Mothers and their supporters.

Too bad, because the president would have seen t-shirts that ask him to “Talk to Cindy,” a reference to Cindy Sheehan, the California mother whose son, Casey Sheehan, was killed in Iraq last year. After her son’s death, Sheehan created Gold Star Families for Peace, an organization through which families that have lost sons in the Iraq war can work for peace. Few noticed Sheehan’s campaign until President Bush retreated to Texas for his annual ranch vacation.

It was then that Sheehan decided to take her pup tent to Texas and camp out beside the road to the ranch. She hopes the president will agree to speak with her.

Columnist Arianne Huffington describes Sheehan:

She of the floppy hat and the six-foot frame (though she’s standing even taller than that these days). A woman driven by faith and conviction who used to think that one person couldn’t make a difference and is learning otherwise. Her humanity stands in stark contrast to the inhumanity of those who refuse to admit their mistakes and continue to send our young men and women to die in Iraq.

A few days before he drove by the Sheehan encampment to attend a fund-raising barbecue, the president flew to Illinois to sign a \$286.4 billion pork-packed highway bill. The signing site was a suburban Chicago Caterpillar Inc. plant in the home district of Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert, an “in-your-face” political act if ever there was one. Caterpillar is at the center of the current church divestment movement because, in addition to producing tractors for highway construction, the

company also produces bulldozers used by the Israeli army to destroy Palestinian homes and build its separation wall.

While Sheehan was camped out in Texas, the president sat smiling, pen in hand, surrounded by the Illinois congressional delegation. The two U.S. senators from Illinois came home to bask in the radiance of federal dollars: current Democratic star Barack Obama and Democratic Senate leader Richard Durbin. Their presence at the Caterpillar site reflects either poor staff work (Have they forgotten it was an Israeli-driven Caterpillar bulldozer that killed Rachel Corrie, a peace activist, in the Gaza Strip two years ago?) or political tone deafness to the power of grieving mothers. Bad mistake, because mothers like Sheehan and Cindy Corrie, Rachel's mother, are not going to go away. On April 13, Cindy Corrie went to London on International Day of Action against Caterpillar to ask department stores to stop using Caterpillar products. And down in Texas, Sheehan continues to live in her pup tent near Crawford where she reports her daily life on her own internet blog. One recent entry:

After three hours of sleep, I was being shaken awake by someone at 6:30 a.m. telling me that the *Today* show wanted me to be on. I had come into town to sleep in a trailer because my tent had been infested with fire ants. We had a very interesting day. We had Bush drive by really, really fast twice. I caught a glimpse of Laura. I was hoping after she saw me that she would come down to Camp Casey with some brownies and lemonade. I waited for her, but she never came.

Sheehan is taking a beating from war supporters, especially from far right media commentators who have tried to distort Sheehan's motives and past statements. Through it all, she remains calm, writing recently that she has come to Texas because "this is George Bush's accountability moment. The mainstream media aren't holding him accountable. Neither is Congress. So I'm not leaving Crawford until he's held accountable."

In a show of support, religious leaders, led by National Council of Churches executive Bob Edgar, held an ecumenical service in a field next to Sheehan's camp site. United Methodist journalist and chaplain Andrew Weaver said that the service was designed to provide a religious context for grieving parents. One father told Weaver that he had given up on religion until he saw the number of clergy and lay persons joining in the service.

Sheehan follows a long tradition. Elisabeth Rehn, former defense minister of Finland and former adviser with the UN department for peace keeping, told BBC news, "There is a tiger-mother in most of us women, something that says 'don't put my son or my daughter in this position.'" And six years ago, it was the Four Mothers Movement that helped force Israel to end its military occupation of Lebanon. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that the mothers "were spat upon, called traitors, and dubbed by one army commander "the four rags." The name-calling did not work. Thanks to persistent pressure from groups like the Four Mothers Movement, Israel ended its occupation of Lebanon.

In her blog, Sheehan reports that one radio commentator called her an "ignorant cow." Her response? "The people who have come out from all over the country to give me a hug and support the cause of peace overwhelm me so much, I don't have time to worry about the negativity and the hatred."